PUNCTUATION CHEAT SHEET

These pages summarize correct use of major punctuation marks—the ones most likely to lead to errors in grammar. When in doubt about a sentence, find the sample closest to the one puzzling you. Match your words and punctuation to the appropriate model, and you're sure to be correct.

COMMA

1. When you begin a sentence with an introduction that's five or more words in length, set those words off with a comma.
   
   Because I love you so much, I'll never let you go.

2. If the introduction is short, skip the comma. Since Christmas I haven't bought a thing.

3. Use a comma anyway if the sentence won't make sense without it. Because we married, mother is happy.

4. To separate items in a series, use the comma. For my birthday I got a watch, a basketball and gold cufflinks.
   
   or

   The surprise was planned by Sam, Joe and Al.
5. To separate subject-verb combinations, place a comma before any of these joining words:

, and , but , so , for , or

The Cubs are in first place, but who's in second?

6. If a subject-verb combination is headed by any of the following words and it could be omitted without changing the meaning of your sentence, you may set off that combo with commas instead of parentheses.

**THE LIST:** who whom that which whoever whomever whichever

The tallest player, who knows what he is doing, just dunked the ball.

Don't use commas if the subject-verb combination is necessary for your sentence to make sense.

The **batter** who has the best ERA gets a special trophy.

7. When a title or other identifier **follows** a name, set off that title with commas.

George W. Bush, former U.S. president, spoke at my graduation.
compared with

President Barack Obama couldn't attend the meeting.

8. To get someone's attention, address then by their title or name followed by a comma.

Reader, please do as I suggest.

9. Use commas to separate parts of a geographical address.

There's quite a difference between Paris, France and Paris, Texas.

**SEMICOLON**

1. Two subject-verb combinations can be joined by a semicolon.

   Steve comes from Illinois; John is a native Iowan.

2. When you're listing a series within a series, use the semicolon to mark the "outer" series and the comma to mark the "inner" series.

   Joanne invented a board game with categories of persons—including actors, politicians, and sports celebrities; places—including cities, states and countries; and things—encompassing song titles to spaceships.
COLON

Use a colon to introduce a list, explanation, or long quotation.

Here's why I'm not giving you a car: I don't want to.

or

While you're at the store, buy these items: pins, tape and gum.

APOSTROPHE

1. Use an apostrophe with a name to show possession. If the word ends in the letter _s_, place the apostrophe after the _s_.

That is Bess' dress.

The boys' dog is named Rover.

2. If the name ends in any other letter, then add an apostrophe and an _s_.

This is Susan's best friend, Rose.

Women's rights are guaranteed by law.
3. When two words are joined together and one or more letters are removed, an apostrophe is added where the missing letters were.

It's time to call and say we're not coming.

**QUOTATION MARKS**

1. Usually we use quotation marks to set off words that someone else has said or written.

"Whether or not we agree," Stan suggested, "I still admire the way you explain your ideas."

Notice the position of the first comma **inside** the quote marks and the position of the second comma **outside** the quotes. Notice, too, that the period is **always** inside the ending quote marks.

2. To show a quote **within** a quote, use single quote marks **inside** the double quotes.

Did Debbie say, "As Juliet I speak the words, 'A rose by any other name would smell as sweet'"?

3. The title of a short creative work like a poem or a single episode of a television series is identified by placing it inside quote marks.

"The Girls Meet the Boys" was a favorite of "Brady Bunch" fans.
DASH

1. To add drama to your writing, use a dash instead of a comma to separate words.

   Judy Smith is ready to elope—whenever her fiancé decides.

2. Two hyphens inserted between words creates a dash.